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Voice

Common Questions and Answers

***Q** I have an employee who says she suffers from depression. She called to ask for time off to see a doctor. I left a message asking her to call me back, but she never called back, she was absent from work that day, and she never provided an explanation. Is this an indication that she isn't sick?*

***Q** I want to praise my employees more, but I am not a "touchy-feely" person. My fear is that I will sound insincere if I start praising employees. Any tips?*

A Although you are frustrated with your employee's failure to communicate with you, and are therefore naturally suspicious about her absence, do not assume she is untruthful. An employee with major depression or another illness with depressive symptoms may experience lethargy so severe that aversion to activity may include not communicating with you. Your employee may care about her job and job security, but her condition may leave her without the mental capacity to demonstrate it. You should respond to her performance problems or attendance issues as you would with other employees, keeping in mind policies of your organization and laws regarding ill or injured employees, but do not act on unsubstantiated suspicions. It is common for supervisors to guess at the hidden meaning of certain employee behaviors. However, this diagnostic step is hazardous and should be avoided because it can expose supervisors to charges of discrimination or other unfair treatment if it influences inappropriate responses to troubled employees.

A If offering praise feels insincere and you are worried about how it might be perceived, your best bet is to offer it at the moment it is earned. You will appear sincere, and it will feel more natural. Employees may notice that offering praise is a new behavior for you, but they are unlikely to question your sincerity. Don't let feeling self-conscious and vulnerable about offering praise lead you to undermine your attempts at it. For example, if your employee has an excellent month selling widgets, don't say, "great job" and follow it with, "it's about time." Most supervisors miss opportunities to praise employees because they are not thinking about it or aren't aware of what can be praised. To find more opportunities, be on the lookout for achievements large and small in areas of customer service, speed, efficiency, great results, problem solving, cost savings, new business generated, creativity, initiative and teamwork.



Helping people lead healthier lives

***Q** I know the signs and symptoms of an employee who could become violent, but what can managers do to reduce the possibility of an emotional and hostile reaction from an employee?*

A Much is written about the signs and symptoms of an employee who may become violent at work. Less is published about the role supervisors can play in helping prevent an employee from responding emotionally with rage and violence to an incident at work. Be a good listener as a supervisor, and do not avoid troubled employees. Do not resist being a sounding board for employees who are upset about perceived injustices and how they are treated by the organization or coworkers. When handling conflicts between two employees, demonstrate neutrality toward the goal of helping resolve conflict. Keep the emphasis on problem solving, not who is right or wrong. Keep control of your own emotions. Don't make a problem worse by demonstrating aggressive behavior or using angry, abusive, or emotional language that a potentially violent employee may model or try to outdo. If you struggle with how to manage a troubled employee, consult with the EAP.

***Q** My employee is sometimes "missing on the job." He is in the building but he can't be found. He usually produces some reason that is work related, but difficult to believe. Is this a sign of an alcoholic employee?*

A For decades, supervisors have been told that employees who are "absent on the job," also called "presenteeism," demonstrate a performance problem often associated with a troubled employee, especially an alcoholic. Presumably some alcoholic employees might hide on the job and drink or sleep off a hangover, but on-the-job absenteeism can be related to many other things. These include medical issues, family problems, distractions the employee finds more appealing than work, or simply an opportunity to sleep. Employees who disappear on the job usually weigh the risk of getting caught. Such behavior is made more likely by factors such as less supervision, a large work site or plant, or having a private vehicle to perform one's duties. When you discover an employee missing from the job site, ask the employee to account for his or her whereabouts. Put all comments in writing, regardless of whether disciplinary action is taken or not, warn the employee about the consequences of being absent on the job, and make a referral to the EAP based on performance problems.

***Q** Every summer my employee skips out of work to go fishing. He doesn't call in; he just doesn't show up. Trust me, there is no personal problem. He just doesn't care about what I think. Should I just deal with this as a disciplinary matter? I need a strategy before next summer rolls around.*

A Assuming you are correct and your employee is off work fishing without calling in or caring about what you think, a personal problem does exist. His behavior is unacceptable. This makes an EAP referral appropriate. Your supervisor referral should be based upon the documented evidence of the attendance issues and his not following proper procedures when taking leave. You must communicate with your employee that you will not accept his behavior and back it up with consequences you believe are appropriate. A supervisor referral to the EAP prior to taking disciplinary action may permit the EAP professional to discover and help him deal with any personal problems that help perpetuate this behavior. The value of the EAP is in helping this employee to change so you don't have to lose him as a result of his absenteeism.

***Q** I have an employee who consistently criticizes decisions or recommendations that I make to the work group. Publicly, I ignore these criticisms, but later stew in private. What can I do, and how do I involve the EAP in managing this behavior?*

***Q** I am a new manager and need to make changes within the work group. I am getting a lot of resistance, although I clearly explained the need for change. I know people naturally resist change, but why?*

***Q** Our organization has faced many financial cutbacks, and employees are doubling up on work. Should I refer employees to the EAP who appear tired and overworked even if they are not troubled with performance problems?*

A Although constructive criticism and debate about ideas should be something you encourage among employees, an employee who habitually and publicly finds fault and points out unfavorable aspects of your decisions negatively affects the work unit. This behavior undermines your leadership role—your ability to direct others and influence thoughts, opinions, and behavior. An employee who habitually disagrees with you should discuss his or her differences in private, as you would in a corrective interview. Meet with your employee and describe the unacceptable behavior, but acknowledge your willingness to accept feedback. Express the negative impact of the public criticism on the work unit and specify the changes you require. Asking your employee to bring disagreements to you privately may reduce them because it removes the motivation to demonstrate aggression through criticism in a public way. Consider a referral to the EAP and consequences for his or her failure to change.

A There is a natural tendency for people to resist changes, both small and large. Once human beings adapt to their environment and have a predictable role within it, change will threaten valued attributes or basic human needs met by the status quo (the way things are). These include feeling in control, security, comfort, prestige, self-esteem, satisfactory relationships, and more. Although the changes you wish to implement are needed or valuable, resistance almost always occurs. Keys to making work unit or organizational change easier include:

- anticipate employees' concerns,
- share your vision,
- involve employees in decisions whenever possible,
- let employees express their feelings,
- answer questions completely,
- think ahead about problems employees may have with changes,
- maintain an "open door" policy, and
- emphasize the benefits change will bring.

A What are you seeing or hearing that indicates your employees are tired and overworked? Are some employees irritable? Have interpersonal conflicts increased? Are there negative attitudes and verbal complaints that diminish morale? Is there more absenteeism? Each of these represents a performance issue that may indicate the need for a supervisor referral. If the cutbacks are permanent, and the organization's expectations for productivity have changed for good, you will need to be concerned with helping your employees accept the new standard and its accompanying performance expectations. Some employees may not be able to adjust as quickly as others and will need more support. Do not hesitate to use the EAP to support your team, either by suggesting they use the EAP or by making supervisor referrals.

***Q** We participated in a critical incident stress debriefing with the EAP after a major accident at work. It was helpful, but one employee is having trouble sleeping. She says she needs a drink or two to sleep at night. Is this normal, and will symptoms go away soon?*

***Q** My employee walks off the job when he gets angry with coworkers or is frustrated by small office conflicts. It's my fault because I permitted it one time so he could calm down, but he's taken it as permission to do it repeatedly. How do I intervene?*

A People respond differently to critical incident stress. It is normal for recovery periods to vary among victims. However, your employee may be suffering from continuing effects of traumatic stress. Her symptoms could also be related to other issues, but only a professional can make that determination. Using alcohol as a sleep aid typically inhibits healthy recovery from trauma or amplifies effects of traumatic stress. Consider recommending the EAP on a self-referral basis because of her reported distress. If performance suffers, you may need to make a supervisory referral. If you take this step, do not reference her emotional state, the drinking, or the traumatic event as the basis for your supervisor referral. Instead, focus on job performance. The EAP will conduct a full assessment.

A The goal of helping your employee find a way to calm down is a good one, but walking off the job permits him to avoid work. This may explain the appeal of leaving the job site. In other words, the problematic behavior is self-reinforcing. You can expect different behavior. Meet with your employee to establish a different expectation for managing interpersonal stress. Let him know that walking off the job is no longer acceptable because it interferes with productivity and that you expect him to cooperate with fellow workers and manage difficulties in the office while remaining on the job site. Recommend that he consider using the EAP, and consider a formal supervisor referral if unacceptable behavior continues.

**For assistance, contact your
EAP professional:
800.765.0770**